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From: Ludwigsen, Emily
Sent: Fri 8/7/2015 8:13:35 PM
Subject: RE: News Clips: CO Mine Spill

Associated Press (via The Republic)

<http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/e01d7fbc82a744e1907a2ebada1593fe/US--Mine-Waste-Leak>

New Mexico blasts EPA for late notice on mustard-colored muck that spilled from Colorado mine

Dan Elliott and Colleen Slevin

August 7, 3:57 pm

DENVER — A plume of mustard-colored muck that spilled from a Colorado mine was inching downstream Friday as frustrated state and local officials awaited word from federal agencies on the kind of pollutants staining the water.

An estimated 1 million gallons of contaminated wastewater is flowing through the Animas River, and it is acidic and contains heavy metals, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said. But the agency still was running tests to see exactly what the sludge contained as it creeps toward communities in northern New Mexico.

"We're having a real problem getting EPA to tell us what's in this stuff," said Don Cooper, emergency manager for San Juan County, New Mexico. "We're just kind of shooting in the dark and telling people to stay away from it."

After the polluted water gushed from the shuttered Gold King Mine on Wednesday, the EPA

warned people to stay out of the river popular with boaters and anglers and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it.

There have been no reports of drinking-water contamination because water utilities shut down their intake valves ahead of the plume to keep it out of their systems. Farmers also closed the gates on their irrigation ditches to protect their crops, and Colorado officials were testing the effects on fish.

New Mexico officials were angry they were not told of the spill until Thursday, nearly a day after it occurred.

"New Mexico deserves better," state Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn said.

The EPA didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on the criticism.

Few details have been released about the spill, except that a cleanup crew accidentally breached a containment structure. The crew was trying to enter the mine as part of a project to pump and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.

The waste spilled into Cement Creek, which flows into the Animas River north of the historic mining town of Silverton in Colorado's San Juan Mountains.

The river is a recreational destination and even served as the backdrop for parts of the movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Passengers on the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad snap thousands of photos of the waterway as the steam-powered trains chug up the narrow canyon beside it.

"It's such a shame, it's such a beautiful river," said Jeff McCoy, who was watching from the riverbank in Durango, where he was on a fishing trip with his son.

"We usually come out here in the beautiful weather to fish, but no fishing today," said McCoy, who lives in Phoenix.

It's expected to reach the northern New Mexico cities of Aztec and Farmington by Friday evening. The heavy metals were making the plume travel more slowly than expected, and it was unclear how far it would reach or when it would dissipate, officials said.

The river had begun to clear up in Silverton, McClain-Vanderpool said. Officials were releasing extra water from at least one reservoir to help dilute the pollution.

The Animas River flows into New Mexico's San Juan River, which is home to some endangered fish and joins the Colorado River in Utah.

Utah's director of water quality, Walt Baker, said residents were advised to avoid the affected rivers.

"Until we know what we're up against and what the effects will be, we're saying, 'Be cautious,'" Baker said.

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Denver Post

http://www.denverpost.com/environment/ci_28601566/animas-river-spill-leaves-durango-officials-edge-waiting

Animas River spill leaves Durango officials on edge waiting for test results

Levels of contaminants in river after EPA's Gold King Mine accident still unknown

Bruce Finley

August 7, 1:11pm

DURANGO — While EPA crews began digging a treatment pond at the blown-out Gold King Mine 60 miles to the north, Durango residents whose lives revolve around water woke up Friday to see the Animas River running bright yellow-orange — contaminated with heavy metals.

Some wept openly. And from store clerks on Main Street to county officials at an emerging basement command post they are asking one overriding question: "What is in the water?"

That's where the anger erupts. Environmental Protection Agency officials who promised water testing results Friday have not delivered.

"We have received no information from the EPA," La Plata County director of emergency management Butch Knowlton said Friday morning. "We're anxiously waiting for test results. It is very frustrating at the local level that we do not have specific information on what is in the river."

San Juan Basin public health director Liane Jollon was trying to reach Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment officials, who told her the EPA was handling the emergency.

"It's not safe for humans, pets or livestock — until we hear from the EPA," Jollon said.

The accident happened Wednesday morning when EPA mine crews were trying to deal with dangerous levels of toxic wastewater filling up the abandoned mine. Only a dirt barrier kept the crumbling mine opening from leaking into Cement Creek. And as the EPA crew was working, the wastewater blew through the barrier.

Early estimate says at least 1 million gallons spilled into the creek, eventually reaching the

Animas River.

State Sen. Ellen Roberts, who sat by the river in Durango for eight hours and tried to warn residents playing in the water on Thursday, was in the basement of the county courthouse Friday morning at the command post.

"It's incredible that we don't know more," Roberts said. "We have the equivalent of an EPA-caused Love Canal here. And we still didn't know what was coming. ... It is unacceptable. We are all held up — because we don't know the water test results."

"The EPA caused it. And the EPA has taken the 'lead role.' The problem is the EPA has left us totally disarmed. The biggest problem now is public health and safety."

The EPA scheduled a public meeting in Durango at 1:30 p.m. Friday at the county administration building to discuss the contamination.

At the Gold King Mine, EPA crews on Friday were building a wastewater retention pond where they can begin to treat heavy metals discharge, said the EPA's mine on-scene coordinator Hayes Griswold.

Griswold told The Denver Post he believes the acidity of the Animas River as it flows through Durango is approximately Ph 5.8 — more acidic than usual but not deadly.

"That's about as acidic as acid rain. It's not bad," Griswold said.

Cadmium may be present in the wastewater, he said, and other main components include zinc and iron oxide.

"We are taking lots of samples," he said.

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eNews Park Forest

<http://www.ene newspf.com/latest-news/science/science-a-environmental/63436-epa-causes-massive-mine-waste-spill-in-colorado-turns-river-orange.html>

EPA Causes Massive Mine Waste Spill in Colorado, Turns River Orange

Nadia Prupis

August 7, 2015

Workers with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) spilled roughly one million gallons of mine waste into a Colorado creek on Wednesday, turning the nearby Animas River bright orange and prompting criticism from environmental groups over the government's lackluster response to the accident.

EPA officials on Thursday confirmed that the leak was caused by its own employees, who had been using heavy machinery to investigate pollutants at the Gold King Mine, an abandoned site north of Silverton.

The agency said impacts on wildlife and the environment in the area would likely be minimal, in part due to the "longstanding" low water quality of the river. But the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) responded that such reasoning "offers no comfort to concerns about pollution impacts farther downstream."

"Endangered species downstream of this spill are already afflicted by same toxic compounds like mercury and selenium that may be in this waste," said CBD's Taylor McKinnon. "These species are hanging by a thread, and every new bit of toxic exposure makes a bad situation worse. EPA's downplaying of potential impacts is troubling and raises deeper questions about the thoroughness of its mine-reclamation efforts."

The Gold King Mine last operated more than a century ago, Colorado Department of Natural Resources spokesperson Todd Hartman told the Denver Post on Thursday. The wastewater that spilled into Cement Creek, which feeds the Animas River, reportedly contains zinc, iron, copper, and other heavy metals—relics of old-fashioned mines that went out of use over time, according to Durango utilities manager Steve Salka.

"The most important thing is what's in it. I need to know," Salka told the Post. "Back in the 1800s, things were used in mining that aren't allowed anymore."

According to a statement from the San Juan County Health Department, the waste contains "high levels" of toxic materials. The EPA had been storing it behind "unconsolidated debris near an abandoned mine portal."

Officials on Wednesday warned farmers to shut off water intakes along the Animas, while law enforcement closed the river to fishers, swimmers, and kayakers. Water supply to nearby colleges and golf courses was also suspended. On shores and bridges, residents stood watching as the emerald-green waters turned thick and mustardy with the discharge.

Health and environmental officials are evaluating the Animas River as it flows its 126-mile course through San Juan and La Plata counties, although they cautioned that it is unknown whether the spill will have any impacts on human health. Colorado Parks and Wildlife placed cages with fish into the river to monitor how they react to the contaminated water and expect to have results by Friday.

Elizabeth Holley, an assistant professor of mining engineering at the Colorado School of Mines, said the spill was "significant."

The EPA called it "unexpected."

"This toxic spill into the Animas is a disturbing incident that just underscores how vulnerable our rivers, streams and fisheries are to abandoned hardrock mine pollution," Steve Kandell of the conservation group Trout Unlimited told Colorado Public Radio on Thursday. "Needless to say, the health of our community and recreation-based economy depends heavily on water quality."

Fusion

<http://fusion.net/story/179631/an-accident-by-the-epa-has-turned-this-colorado-river-bright-orange/>

An accident by the EPA has turned this Colorado river bright orange

Patrick Hogan

August 7, 11:49am

This is not one of the Environmental Protection Agency's prouder moments.

A team from the federal agency accidentally released a million gallons of toxic wastewater into the Animas River, a tributary of the Colorado River. As a result, the river water has turned a bright Tang-y orange color. The EPA had been working to clean up an abandoned mine in southwestern Colorado when it released the wastewater.

The polluted river water is filled with sediment and dissolved metals. No one's sure exactly how toxic the contents are to human beings, but Colorado's La Plata County has closed the river to the public to be safe. It's difficult to know at this point the larger effect this will have on the environment of the region, but it's a safe guess that probably nothing good will come of it.

The Animas River runs through the downtown of Durango, Colo., a popular tourist destination, and is a major source of the city's drinking water. The Durango Herald reports that the city has stopped pumping water out of the river to be safe, and that there's been a run on local grocery stores for bottled water.

The Herald also made this video, explaining the origin and effects of the toxic plume.

At this time of year, the Animas is usually filled with fishers, kayakers, white water rafters and people floating down lazier river bends in inner tubes. This is a rough way to kick off August, especially since school is back in session August 25.

I lived downriver of Durango for four years in Farmington, N.M, where the Animas is one of three rivers that flow through the town. In the middle of the high desert, it's hard to overestimate how important the river is to the environment, economy and sanity of the region. Here's hoping the effects of this disaster are quick and easily-remedied.

But for now, stay out of the water.

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The Hill

<http://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/250561-epa-blamed-for-mine-waste-spill-in-colo-river>

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EPA blamed for mine waste spill in Colo river

Timothy Cama

August 7, 11:16am

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is taking blame for a spill of one million gallons of mine wastewater into a river in Colorado.

The spill of heavy metals like zinc, iron and copper turned the Animas River orange and triggered warnings Thursday to downstream communities that use the river for agriculture and recreation, The Denver Post reported.

“There’s nothing that can be done to stop the flow of the river,” Joe Lewandowski, a spokesman for Colorado Parks & Wildlife, told The Post. “We can only wait until the flows slow down. We had a big heavy spring [of rain] here.”

The EPA is testing the river to determine whether it is safe for use.

The spill was triggered when the EPA was using heavy machinery to check for pollutants at the abandoned Gold King Mine north of Silverton, The Post said.

EPA workers were removing backfill from the mine to access it and accidentally released a plug that was holding back the mine waste. None of the workers were injured.